2: Karsten E-5 (1911-1913)1932 SI7 Matacc

Choroti SK6

CHAPTER XVI.

Ceremonial fasting.

M
785 Fasting or restrictions in diet play an important part among the religious practices of the Chaco Indians. In most cases ceremonial
262 fasting seems to be due to the belief that in eating man may come in contact with dangerous disease-bringing spirits which are in some way associated with the food. Since harmful spirits are supposed to have a special liking for certain kinds of food, these kinds of food are in some cases taboo to the Indians. The common belief that the spirits of the dead reincarnate themselves in various animals has in the first place given rise to all sorts of food restrictions, for the meat of such animals is generally, although not invariably, regarded as taboo.

M
262 The Indians of the Gran Chaco, dependent upon very restricted sources of subsistence, as a rule utilize everything that can possibly be used as food. Thus several animals are eaten which we do not regard as fit for food, and if a certain animal is despised, this is, as a rule due to superstitious ideas of one kind or another. The *Choroti* for instance
C
262 among other things regard such animals as locusts, certain beetles, lizards, and a kind of rat as delicacies; of others the fox is considered edible, as also of birds the owl and a certain kind of vulture (called
[888] *carancho* in Spanish, *Polyborus vulgaris*). In regard to the fox, the owl, and the vulture, however, there is the restriction that only *old* people can eat them, not young people and children, whom such food would do harm. In several cases I received from the younger Choroti men the explanation: »The old ones can eat the meat of this or that animal, not we». This means that such animals or birds as those just mentioned are in some way associated with evil spirits; the eating of the meat of these animals therefore would have disastrous consequences for young people and children who have less power of resistance against evil

2: Karsten E-5 (1911-1913)1932 SI7 Mataco SI7

Choroti SI6

C 262

spirits, but not for old men who are initiated in the magic art and know how to render them harmless. — It is curious that on the other hand an animal like the *deer* is regarded by the Choroti as absolutely unfit for food. Not even old men would touch the flesh of deer, believing that if they did, they would die. This is due to the belief, mentioned before, that the deer is an evil spirit (*möhsek*), the reincarnation of the spirit of a sorcerer, a superstition which is widespread among the South American Indians and everywhere manifests itself in an aversion to eating the meat of this innocent animal.

M 785

Ceremonial fasting, as we have seen, is prescribed among the Choroti and the Mataco on certain occasions which are regarded as important and critical in some respect. Thus the father has to restrict his diet when he is lying in couvade, and girls have to diet during their first menstruation. We have also seen that behind these practices there is the fear of evil spirits in one form or another.

If disease and death bringing demons are believed to enter easily into the body with the food eaten, we can understand why eating is so often to the Indians a ceremonial business. This is also intelligible from the point of view that by eating an animal and coming in contact with its soul, a man may acquire the spiritual qualities of that animal. This idea explains the curious custom practised among the Tobas, that when a chief's daughter attains puberty, the men alone have to eat the meat of the ostrich, whereas the women eat the meat of the armadillo. As a general rule, both among the Tobas and among other Chaco Indians, men and women do not eat together but separately, the men first and the women afterwards. This custom is observed so strictly, that one may assume a particular superstition behind it. Moreover, when the Indians eat, they do not speak much with one another and do not like to be spoken to. Since they believe that man may evade evil spirits by keeping silence and avoiding attracting their attention, it is possible that the ceremonial character of their banquets is partly connected with this idea. And as women are especially believed to attract the spirits, this may be, or may originally have been, one reason why the men avoid eating with them. But it should also be remembered that in primitive societes eating together is believed to establish a mysterious union or connection between all those taking part in the common banquet. Since a strict distinction is made between a man's and a woman's spiritual qualities, it is not difficult to understand that the men avoid the company of the women on those occasions when they eat. However

M 264

M [562]